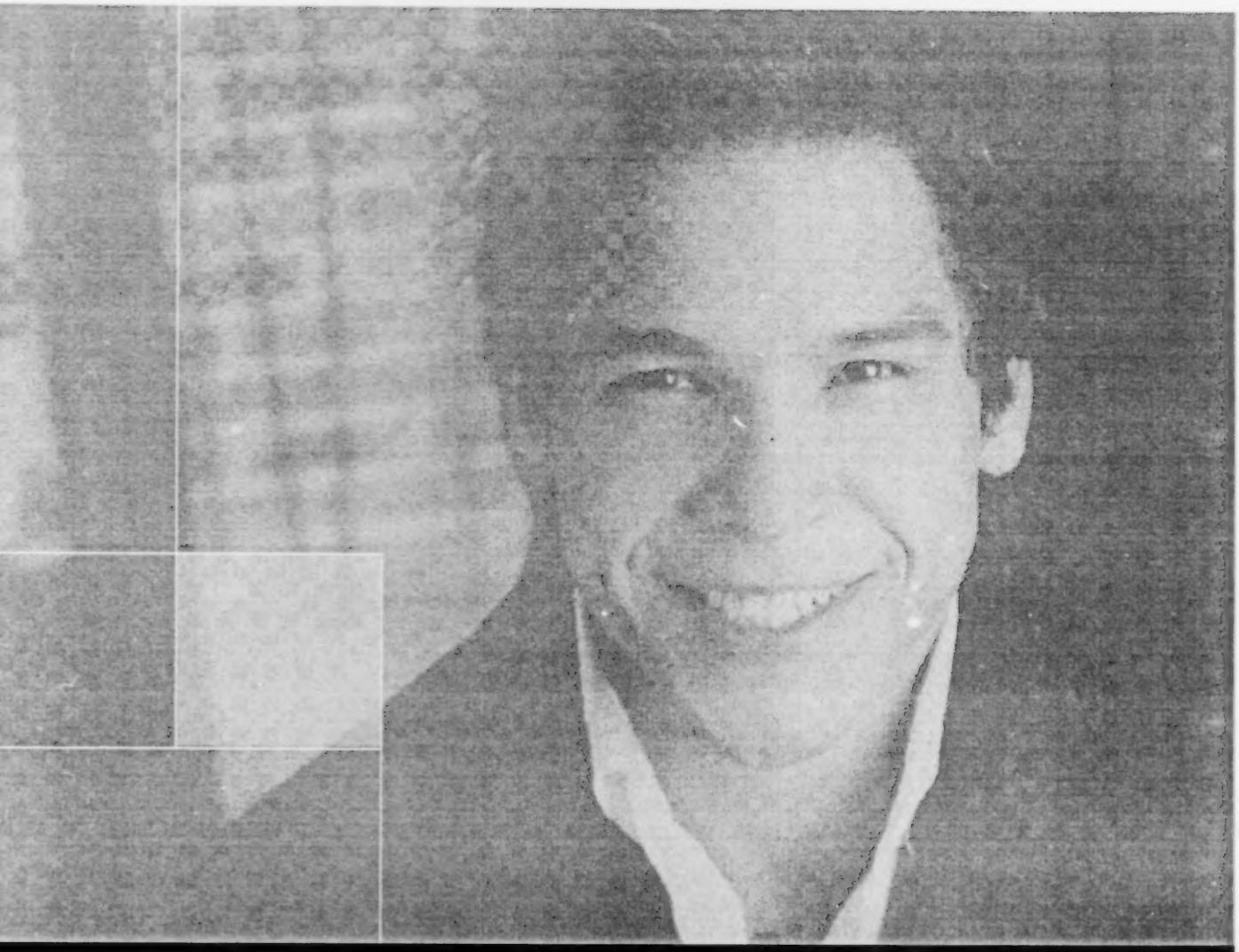

BACKGROUND REPORT TO A PLAN FOR A MENTAL HEALTH RESEARCH PROGRAM FOR ALBERTA

FEBRUARY. 2005

ABORIGINAL FORUM SUMMARY REPORT

This report has been prepared for the Provincial Mental Health Research Plan Working Group as a working paper in the development of: *"A Plan for a Mental Health Research Program for Alberta"* by staff and consultants working with the Alberta Mental Health Board.

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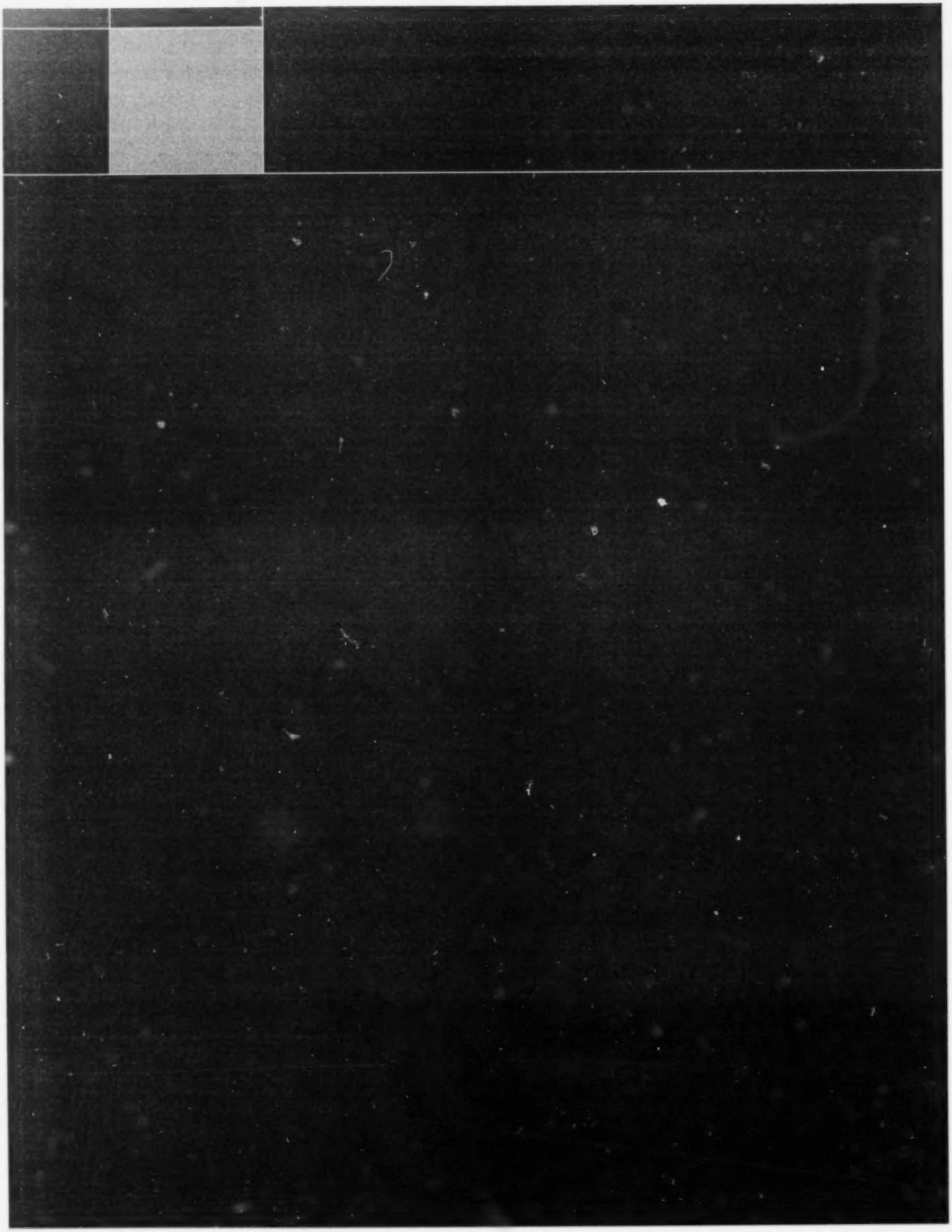

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INTRODUCTION

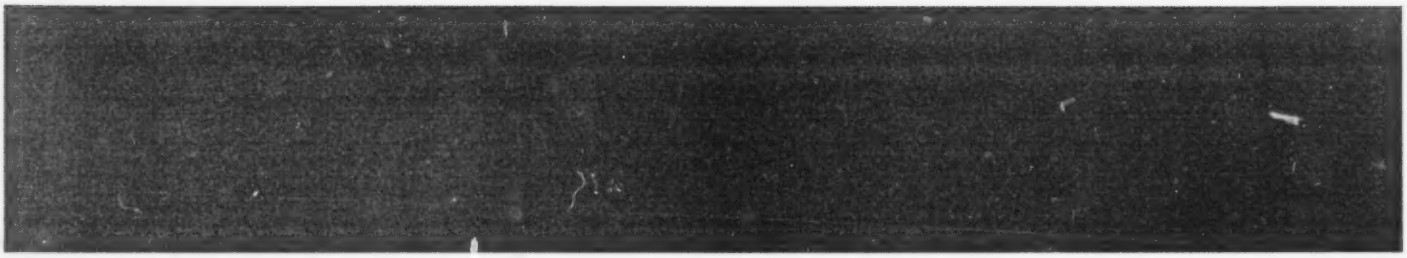
On November 9th, 2004, an Aboriginal Research Community Forum was held at the Wingate Inn in Edmonton to provide the opportunity for academic and community Aboriginal health researchers and other individuals who provide services within Aboriginal communities to respond to and provide input into the developing Provincial Mental Health Research Plan working paper. Approximately 28 participants attended this full-day forum that was coordinated by the AMHB Aboriginal Mental Health Team and included a keynote address by respected Aboriginal researcher, Dr. Betty Bastien. This report has been prepared to share the ideas, expressed wishes, and concerns shared by participants at the forum in response to the following questions:

- How can research partnership opportunities with Aboriginal communities best be developed?
- How can mental health research be respectful of Aboriginal people in Alberta?
- How can the metal health research plan create more opportunities for you and your colleagues to become involved in research partnerships related to the design and delivery of mental health services for Aboriginal people?

Participants were divided into small groups to facilitate a more comprehensive discussion of the above questions. Groups then summarized their discussions and presented the information to the larger group. It is important to note that the questions asked of forum participants were not always responded to directly; rather, dialogue relating to the appropriate and respectful practice of research in Aboriginal communities and the implementation of the developing research plan from an Aboriginal perspective occurred spontaneously. A writer in each of the groups took notes, and three AMHB staff attending the forum also took notes from the large group discussion. All notes were then submitted to the AMHB Aboriginal Mental Health Team for review and assessment of content accuracy and appropriateness. The notes were then systematically analyzed for categories, and the following three major themes were identified:

1. Importance of knowing the Aboriginal community and building relationships
2. Importance of involving the Aboriginal community
3. Importance of recognizing, respecting, and utilizing the strengths of Aboriginal people

In addition, one minor theme emerged that deserves attention, that of *loss of connectedness for Aboriginal people in urban centres*.



Major Theme 1:

Importance of knowing the Aboriginal Community and building relationships

The concept of community was described by one small group as having different meanings among Aboriginal groups. As well, there may be different communities within one Aboriginal group. Other groups agreed with this interpretation of the concept, and strongly supported the importance therefore of "knowing" the community before beginning any type of research process. Forum participants emphasized that prior to knowing a community one must first know and understand oneself, and that part of knowing oneself is being connected with others and with the Creator. It was generally felt that there are those who have achieved this and those who have not.

Understanding the structure of a specific Aboriginal community, jurisdictional issues that affect the community, the political context of the community, and the protocols to be used in a community when conducting research are extremely important. However, almost all participants agreed that they are not enough. To truly understand, an outsider must "know" the community, and knowing is only achieved through relationship-building and respect. Developing relationships takes time and is paramount to understanding the uniqueness of a community and past community experience that has helped to form the community's identity. As well, knowing the ethics, truths, and boundaries of a community helps in understanding what is important to that community and is only achieved through relationship-building.

Major Theme 2:

Importance of involving the Aboriginal Community

Relationships are built on trust, and participants felt that trust can be built through involving the community in all aspects of the research process, from identification of the research question to dissemination of the findings. However, because knowing the community is so important, it was felt that researchers needed to be involved with the community and needed to make the connections and build relationships prior to even posing questions. By spending time with community members and community service providers, linkages could be built; questions could evolve naturally and collaboratively. Participants understood involvement in a community and the building of relationships as being at four levels: the community level, the spiritual level, the agency level, and the political level.

It was unanimous within the small participant groups that involving Aboriginal people in a meaningful way in all aspects of the research process, including identifying priorities and how research is actually conducted, is critical to any successful research endeavor. Identifying whether a question or issue is substantive enough that the community will want to be involved cannot be done unless there is collaboration "up front". An interactive and participatory process should evolve, and organizations wanting to support the engagement of Aboriginal communities in research need to work together. It was stated by one group that if the communities were "champions" of the research, the research would be a success.

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Major Theme 3:

Importance of recognizing, respecting, and utilizing the strengths of Aboriginal people

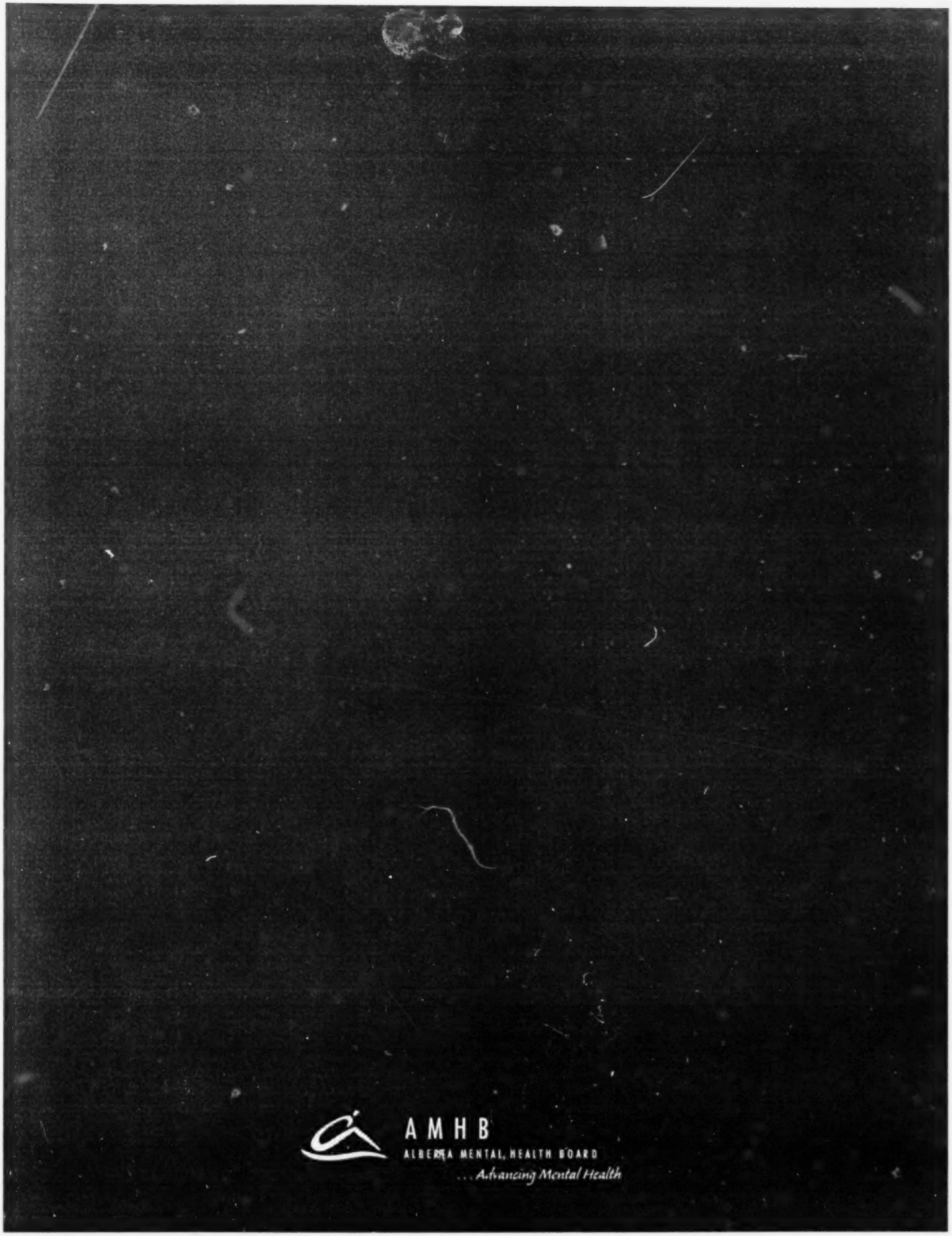
Forum participants unanimously supported the importance of recognizing and utilizing the strengths of Aboriginal people, both at the Aboriginal community level and within the research community. First Nations colleges are an excellent source of knowledge and wisdom, and there are Aboriginal researchers and elders in Alberta that should be participating on research ethics boards to review any research that involves Aboriginal peoples and Aboriginal communities. Participants also supported the right and the ability for Aboriginal communities to own and control their own research. Recent policies and strategies related to ownership, control, access, and possession (OCAP) have been developed by the National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO) and adopted by First Nations organizations across Canada.

Indigenous methodology has gained support world-wide over the past decade. Participants strongly supported moving away from a western medical model of research with Aboriginal communities and toward an indigenous model that respects and utilizes Aboriginal ways of knowing in research methodology. These ways of knowing may include ceremonies, prayer, storytelling, circle theories, and the recognition of peoples' own life stories. Passing on knowledge through stories is universal and particularly relevant in Aboriginal culture.

Minor theme:

Loss of connectedness for Aboriginal people in urban centres

There was some discussion in the groups about the migration of many individuals from Aboriginal communities to urban centers and the subsequent growth in urban centers of Aboriginal and mixed families that have become disconnected from Aboriginal culture and community. Participants raised this concern as a possible priority for future research.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